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The situation in Afghanistan

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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2405 (2018), in which the Secretary-General was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including political, humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of the previous report, on 27 February 2018 (A/72/768–S/2018/165).

II. Relevant developments

3. The impasse between the Presidential Palace and the former Governor of Balkh Province, Mohammad Atta Noor, concluded with Mr. Noor leaving office on 22 March. In anticipation of the forthcoming elections, several political movements and parties joined forces to lobby for changes to the electoral system. The Independent Election Commission announced that 20 October 2018 was the new date on which the parliamentary and district council elections would be held and launched a nationwide voter registration process. However, electoral preparations were marred by slow decision-making and a series of violent attacks targeting election-related facilities, which lowered the turnout for the voter registration campaign and weakened public trust in the electoral process. The President, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, presented a comprehensive offer of direct negotiations with the Taliban during the second meeting of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation, receiving broad acclaim from Afghan leaders and strong support from the international community. However, the Taliban announced its 2018 spring offensive without responding directly to the Government's offer of talks. Following the announcement, the Taliban intensified its military operations, launching a series of attacks against

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district administrative centres. The security situation remained highly unstable, with several mass-casualty incidents in urban areas. Complex and suicide attacks became the leading cause of civilian casualties. Overall civilian casualty figures remained high but steady. Afghanistan withdrew its reservation to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and acceded to its Optional Protocol. The United Nations presented its "One United Nations" framework to the President, aimed at strengthening its added value to the people of Afghanistan. The humanitarian situation remained serious, with continuing high levels of displacement, constraints on humanitarian access and drought conditions further exacerbating humanitarian challenges. Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity.

A. Political developments

4. In the previous report, it was noted that the political sphere had been dominated by an extended stand-off between the President and the Jam'iyat-i Islami political party, following the dismissal in December 2017 of Mohammad Atta Noor, a member of that party, from his long-held position as Governor of Balkh Province. Mr. Noor's refusal to leave office led to a stalemate of several months, as the two sides negotiated the terms of his departure. The impasse ended without violence on 22 March, when the former Governor stood down in favour of his chosen successor, fellow Jam'iyat affiliate Ishaq Rahguzar, after the President and Mr. Noor agreed to a deal. Tensions between the President and the Jam'iyat-i Islami political party persisted, however, as the party joined forces with other political movements to lobby for changes to the electoral system.

5. In anticipation of the upcoming elections, opposition politics gained further momentum. On 2 May, Mr. Noor, along with the Second Chief Executive Officer, Mohammad Mohaqeq, travelled to Ankara and met the First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, to discuss the consolidation and expansion of the Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan, which was established in June 2017 as an association of political figures mostly from the northern region. The following day, the group announced the formation of a new alliance, the National Coalition of Afghanistan, formally expanding the geographical and ethnic diversity of the previous coalition to include some prominent figures from the Pashtun belt in the south, south-east and east of the country.

6. Faced with an increasingly mobilized political opposition, the Presidential Palace continued to reach out to the First Vice-President, who remains under indictment for the alleged sexual assault of a political rival in 2016 and who has resided in Turkey since May 2017. Supporters of the First Vice-President continued to press for his return ahead of the start of the candidate nominations for the parliamentary elections. On 8 May, a delegation including the founder of Hizb-i Islami, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Faizullah Zaki, travelled to Ankara, reportedly to discuss the preparations for Mr. Dostum's return to Afghanistan.

7. The President and his supporters also made efforts to strengthen their alliance with the Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) political movement and particularly with its founder, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former insurgent who returned to Kabul in April 2017 after signing a peace agreement with the Government. On 14 March, the Government convened a meeting of representatives of security institutions and line ministries to discuss the implementation of the peace agreement of 2016. Subsequently, the Government and Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) began the process of vetting a further 160 prisoners for release under the agreement. In May, the Government allocated additional land to the Hizb-i Islami leadership in Kabul,

Nangarhar and Laghman Provinces, and amended the draft land allocation decree to include Hizb-i Islami affiliated returnees to Afghanistan as a priority category for humanitarian land allocation. The Government also took steps to increase the representation of the Gulbuddin faction in leadership positions, most notably through a reshuffle of provincial governors in late February, which rewarded several of Mr. Hekmatyar's associates.

8. Meanwhile, Jam'iyat-i Islami continued to lobby for changes to the electoral system to include an element of proportional representation. Although it had originally emerged in the context of negotiations over Mr. Noor, the demand gained traction and quickly attracted the support of other political movements. In March, a group of 27 political parties, represented by Jam'iyat, Junbesh-i Milli and two factions each of Hizb-i Islami and Hizb-i Wahdat Islami, formed a contact group to lobby both the Government and the international community for changes to the electoral law. On 5 April, at a first meeting with the contact group, the President undertook to seek legal guidance on the issue from the Supreme Court and the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution. At a second meeting on 7 May, the President reiterated his stance that relevant institutions needed to decide on the matter. The group maintained its position throughout the reporting period, despite concerns that the proposed changes could cause further delays in the electoral calendar and that reforms made so close to an election could diminish the credibility of both the reform and the election.

9. A further political complication arose with the Government's announcement on 3 May of the long-debated roll-out of electronic national identity cards (*e-tazkeras*). The announcement triggered an immediate backlash from political figures. The move prompted particularly strong criticism from non-Pashtun leaders, many of whom objected to the inclusion of the word "Afghan" to define citizenship, arguing that the adjective has historically been used to denote Pashtuns. The Chief Executive, Abdullah, who had opposed issuing electronic identity cards until the ethnic controversy was resolved, responded with a speech criticizing the Government on a range of issues including the lack of electoral reform.

10. The Independent Election Commission continued preparations to hold parliamentary and district council elections. On 1 April, the Commission announced that 20 October 2018 would be the new election date, postponed from the previously announced date of 7 July. Voter registration began on 14 April, marking the first full registration of voters since 2003. When completed, the voter registration process is designed to lead to a comprehensive voter registry with polling station-specific voter lists intended to reduce fraud and facilitate operations. In coordination with the Independent Election Commission, the Afghanistan Central Civil Registration Authority began to scale up the issuance of the paper-based national identity cards (*tazkeras*), which are the basis for voter registration. In an effort to promote better coordination between electoral stakeholders, the Government has held regular high-level meetings between the different government institutions involved in the electoral process and the Independent Election Commission, as well as the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and key donor countries. On 27 March, the fifth national election forum was held to encourage engagement between the Independent Election Commission and political stakeholders. Provincial election forums were conducted in 31 provinces on 30 April and 1 May. Throughout the process, UNAMA engaged with senior political party leaders to facilitate dialogue with the Independent Election Commission.

11. Nonetheless, many challenges continued to arise in relation to the electoral preparations. Difficulties persisted in recruiting Commission staff, with approximately 140 key positions at both the headquarters and the provincial levels remaining vacant. Operational problems continue to affect the distribution of identity

documents and voter registration stickers. Most notably, the placement of stickers indicating eligibility to vote on identity documents caused security concerns, particularly following reports that insurgents were threatening citizens whose identity documents bore stickers. On 12 May, the Presidential Palace announced that copies of the documents could be used for voter registration purposes, leaving people free to show their original documents without stickers if stopped by insurgents. On 13 May, however, four commissioners told the media that the decision had been illegal under the Election Law, and the acting Chief Electoral Officer resigned over the issue. On 16 May, the Independent Election Commission voted to implement a compromise solution, allowing the issuance of duplicate identity documents for the purposes of voter registration.

12. The apparent divisions within the Independent Election Commission and tensions between the Commission and the Presidential Palace further exacerbated public concerns regarding the credibility of the electoral preparations. Voter registration figures have been substantially lower than Commission targets, affected by security concerns and a lack of institutional capacity in many provinces. As at 17 May, nearly 1.8 million voters had registered, of whom 28 per cent were women. In an attempt to remedy the slow start to the voter registration campaign, the Commission announced on 10 May that it would extend voter registration in urban centres by an additional month, while simultaneously initiating registration in rural areas. However, the slow start to registration, the poor public information campaign and minimal outreach undertaken exacerbated concerns regarding the competence and independence of the Independent Election Commission.

13. The Government took an important step towards advancing a peace process during the second meeting of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation, held on 28 February, at which the President offered a comprehensive proposal for direct peace talks with the Taliban, without preconditions. In the proposal, he promised to consider issues such as political inclusion, a ceasefire, constitutional review, prisoner releases, the removal of leaders from sanctions lists and the reintegration of refugees and former combatants as part of the peace negotiations. The Government's offer was praised by a wide variety of political figures and received strong support from the international community. In the final declaration of the meeting, participants endorsed the Government's offer and made reference to the possibility of renegotiating contested aspects of the international community's future role in Afghanistan, long a sticking point in the negotiations between the Government and the Taliban. However, the Taliban did not respond formally to the offer, despite reports of internal debates within the group on how to respond. On 25 April, the Taliban announced its annual spring offensive campaign, this year named "Al-Khandaq", without mentioning the Government's peace offer of 28 February.

14. In April, following a suicide attack in a stadium during a wrestling match in Helmand Province, local civil society actors began erecting "peace tents" in the provincial capital. Within days, the movement began to spread across the country, reaching a total of 20 provinces. The protesters called on all combatants to lay down their arms and negotiate a peace deal. The movement was unprecedented as a nationwide, self-generated, civic movement demanding peace and has so far avoided being co-opted by either the Government or the Taliban. Neither the Government nor the Taliban, however, has heeded the calls for a cessation of violence and the opening of dialogue. Following an apparent loss of momentum, on 11 May the Helmand protesters announced that they would march to Kabul and appealed to all sides again to lay down their arms and stop killing civilians during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

B. Security

15. The highly unstable security situation continued to dominate political, humanitarian and development conditions in Afghanistan during the reporting period. UNAMA recorded a total of 5,675 security incidents between 15 February and 15 May, a 7 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2017. During the reporting period, the eastern region was the most affected, followed by the southern, northern, and south-eastern regions, which accounted for 82 per cent of recorded incidents in total. Armed clashes continued to make up the bulk of conflict-related incidents, accounting for 64 per cent of all incidents, followed by improvised explosive devices, which accounted for 15 per cent of all incidents. However, there was a notable increase in targeted assassinations and suicide attacks, by 35 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively, when compared with the same period in 2017. The number of reported air strikes by international military forces and the Afghan Air Force remained high, representing 5 per cent of all incidents, an increase of 18 per cent since the previous report and of 24 per cent since the same period in 2017.

16. The conflict consolidated along increasingly discernible battle lines with fighting concentrated in a few provinces. Nangarhar, Helmand, Kunar, Kandahar, Faryab and Ghazni Provinces accounted for a total of 60 per cent of security incidents. Despite fierce contestation in some areas, there was no significant change in territorial control between the Government and the Taliban during the reporting period. Mass-casualty suicide attacks in urban centres continued to account for a high number of casualties.

17. On 25 April, the Taliban announced its annual spring offensive, this year named "Al-Khandaq". In the announcement, the group made direct reference to the South Asia strategy of the United States of America, vowing to target international military forces and their supporters within Afghanistan, and invoked as justification a number of specific grievances, including the presence of foreign troops, civilian casualties, the destruction of property and "illegitimate activities". Unlike last year's declaration, this year's announcement focused almost entirely on the Taliban's military strategy, with few references to the group's political and governance objectives. The announcement was accompanied by an immediate spike in conflict-related incidents, with over 50 incidents recorded in 21 provinces on the same day as the announcement, suggesting a significant degree of command and control and an ability to match stated strategy with operations.

18. In subsequent weeks, the Taliban increased the frequency of its attacks against district administrative centres, temporarily overrunning Raghistan and Kohistan in Badakhshan Province, Qal'ah-ye Zal in Kunduz Province, Talah wa Barfak in Baghlan Province, Bal Chiragh in Faryab Province and Anjiristan, Deh Yak and Jaghatuy in Ghazni Province. For the first time since 2016, on 14 May the Taliban also launched a large-scale assault on a provincial capital, Farah City in the west of Afghanistan, besieging key government buildings inside the city. The attack prompted heavy armed clashes, which lasted for several days before the Taliban was eventually repelled by Afghan National Defence and Security Forces with international air support.

19. The Government continued to reform the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces in accordance with its four-year road map on security sector reform. During the reporting period, the Government completed the transfer of the Afghan Border Police from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Defence and renamed it the Afghan Border Forces, in line with its new focus on combat operations. The Government also continued to scale up the Afghan Special Forces as part of a plan to double their number under the four-year road map. During the reporting period,

2,000 additional commandos joined the special operations battalions. Efforts also continued to increase the size of the Afghan Air Force, which is expected to double by 2023 under the road map. In addition, the Government brought forward the retirement of senior military officials under the provisions of the Inherent Law of 2017, with a retirement order for a second group of 61 Afghan National Army generals issued by the President on 12 May.

20. During the reporting period the Government began preparations for the establishment of a new security force, the Afghan National Army Territorial Force. The Force is expected to comprise about 36,000 personnel and will mainly be responsible for defending areas cleared of insurgents by military operations. Around 5,000 soldiers have been recruited in a pilot phase to be rolled out in four provinces and have commenced training under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence.

21. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) maintained its presence in Nangarhar, Kunar and Jowzjan Provinces. Armed clashes between the Taliban and ISIL-KP were reported in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces, as the two groups continued a months-long struggle for control over territory. The group also claimed responsibility for 11 mass-casualty suicide attacks in the reporting period, including attacks in Kabul on 30 April and 9 May. In the attack carried out on 30 April, a suicide attacker targeted a checkpoint of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, followed by a second attack approximately 30 minutes later. The second suicide attacker was reportedly posing as a journalist and detonated his vest among a group of journalists who were reporting on the first incident. In a worrying development, these attacks, mostly against Shia targets, appeared designed to foment sectarian strife.

22. Three incidents involving United Nations personnel were reported, including one case of intimidation and two criminal incidents.

C. Regional cooperation

23. Since the previous report, there have been significant steps towards consolidating a common international approach on peace and stability in Afghanistan. On 28 February, the Government hosted the second meeting of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation, with the participation of 26 countries, as well as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations. In his statement at the event, Mr. Ghani announced that the Government is open to peace talks with the Taliban. In a joint declaration at the conclusion of the event, participants unanimously welcomed the President's offer and agreed to greater regional and international cooperation on peace and reconciliation and counter-terrorism.

24. This consensus on peace in Afghanistan was further strengthened at a conference held in Tashkent on 27 March, which was attended by high-level representatives of 23 countries, as well as the European Union and the United Nations. The participants reiterated their support for the offer by the Government of Afghanistan to hold direct talks with the Taliban. In the final conference declaration, participants expressed support for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, leading to an inclusive peace agreement between the Government and the Taliban. The opposition of the international community to all manifestations of terrorism without distinction was also stressed. In a further effort to sustain the international momentum towards a peace process, Indonesia hosted a trilateral meeting of religious scholars from Afghanistan, Indonesia and Pakistan on 11 May. The scholars issued a statement calling on all fighting factions to lay down their arms, endorsing a peace process and condemning terrorist tactics such as suicide bombings as un-Islamic. The Taliban was invited to send clerics to the conference but declined and, following the

conference, issued a statement dismissing the conference as an initiative of the United States of America and noting that it had failed to pass a fatwa against jihad in Afghanistan.

25. Afghanistan has taken steps towards developing closer regional economic cooperation. On 23 February, the Afghan segment of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline was officially inaugurated at a ceremony in Herat City, attended by the President of Afghanistan, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, the President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, and the Minister of State for External Affairs of India, M.J. Akbar. Speaking at the ceremony, Mr. Ghani remarked that the pipeline represented an important milestone for regional economic connectivity. On 19 April, the senior officials meeting of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process was held in Istanbul. At the meeting, the participating countries, led by Afghanistan and Turkey as the Co-chairs for 2018, agreed to a seventh confidence-building measure on agriculture under the Heart of Asia framework and discussed ways of reinvigorating regional cooperation through practical measures related to the confidence-building measures.

26. Following months of heightened tensions, Afghanistan and Pakistan finalized an agreement on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity. On 6 April, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, visited Kabul for the third round of talks on the Action Plan. During the visit, Mr. Abbasi held separate meetings with Mr. Ghani and the Chief Executive, Abdullah, to discuss the Afghan peace process, the regional political and security situation, bilateral trade, the return of refugees, border violations and the fight against terrorism. At the conclusion of the visit, the two sides agreed to seven key principles within the framework of the Action Plan. However, the finalization of the framework was temporarily delayed following cross-border fighting on 15 and 16 April. Soon after the incidents, military officials of Afghanistan and Pakistan met to defuse tensions and agree to a ceasefire. On 1 May, at a ceremony attended by Mr. Abbasi, Pakistan formally reopened the Ghulam Khan border crossing point between Khost Province in Afghanistan and North Waziristan in Pakistan, which had remained closed since 2014. The opening of the crossing, the third largest official crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan, is expected to increase cross-border trade. On 14 May, the Action Plan was finalized in Islamabad by the two countries' delegations, led by the Deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Hekmat Khalil Karzai, and the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, Tehmina Janjua, respectively. Under the Action Plan, six working groups for cooperation were operationalized in different fields.

III. Human rights

27. On 12 April, UNAMA released a report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict for the first quarter of 2018.[1] The Mission documented 2,258 civilian casualties (763 people killed and 1,495 injured) between 1 January and 31 March 2018, reflecting levels of harm similar to the same periods in 2016 and 2017. UNAMA attributed 67 per cent of all civilian casualties to anti-government elements (50 per cent to the Taliban, 11 per cent to ISIL-KP, 4 per cent to unidentified anti-government elements, including self-proclaimed ISIL-KP, and 2 per cent to fighting between anti-government elements), 18 per cent to pro-government forces, 11 per cent to unattributed crossfire, and 4 per cent to other incidents, including explosive remnants of war and cross-border shelling. For the first time, suicide and complex attacks became the leading cause of civilian casualties, surpassing ground engagements. The

[1] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "Quarterly report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict: 1 January to 31 March 2018".

Mission also noted that civilian casualties from attacks by anti-government elements deliberately targeting civilians more than doubled compared with the first quarter of 2017, accounting for 39 per cent of all civilian casualties and 59 per cent of the civilian casualties attributed to anti-government elements. Consistent with the trends observed in 2017, anti-government elements continued to direct attacks against the minority Shia Muslim population, causing 154 civilian casualties (49 people killed and 105 injured), nearly all from suicide and complex attacks for which responsibility was claimed by ISIL-KP.

28. The use of improvised explosive device tactics (including complex, suicide and non-suicide attacks) caused 1,018 civilian casualties (311 persons killed and 707 injured), comprising 45 per cent of all civilian casualties. Ground engagements accounted for 663 civilian casualties (161 persons killed and 502 injured), amounting to 30 per cent of all civilian casualties. UNAMA continued to document high numbers of civilian casualties from aerial strikes: 142 civilian casualties (67 persons killed and 75 injured), with women and children comprising more than half of those casualties. The Mission documented 583 child casualties (155 children killed and 428 injured), accounting for 25 per cent of all civilian casualties. Casualties among women decreased by 24 per cent, resulting in a total of 60 women killed and 157 injured, with more than half of those casualties caused by ground engagements.

29. On 7 May, the Mission released a special report entitled "Airstrikes in Dasht-e-Archi district, Kunduz Province, 2 April 2018" on airstrikes carried out by the Afghan Air Force during an outdoor religious ceremony in a Taliban-controlled area in Kunduz Province. The report notes with concern the indiscriminate nature of the attack, which resulted in at least 107 casualties (36 persons killed and 71 injured), most of whom were children, and calls on the Government to conduct an impartial investigation. On 16 May, the President issued a public statement apologizing for the incident, expressing condolences and offering compensation. On 10 May, the Mission released a special report entitled "Election-related attacks and abuses during the initial voter registration period". In the report, it is noted that, since the commencement of voter registration on 14 April, there had been 23 verified election-related security incidents, resulting in 271 civilian casualties (86 persons killed and 185 injured), the majority of whom were women and children, including an attack on 22 April in a mostly Shia-inhabited area of Kabul that had caused the deaths of 60 civilians and injured 13 others, responsibility for which was claimed by ISIL-KP. The report further documented the abduction of 26 civilians and incidents involving threats, intimidation and harassment. It was also noted that around 75 per cent of election-related security incidents occurred in schools or mosques used for election-related purposes, disrupting education activities.

30. From 1 January to 31 March, the country task force on monitoring and reporting verified 11 incidents of attacks against schools and related personnel (five by the Taliban, three by ISIL-KP, two by undetermined anti-government elements and one by a pro-government militia), compared with 13 incidents in the previous quarter. Of concern were two incidents of threats by the Taliban against education facilities that led to widespread school closures in the provinces of Kunduz (342 schools) and Logar (29 schools). In addition, the task force verified the military use of three schools (one by ISIL-KP and two by the Afghan National Army), compared with seven schools in the previous quarter. The task force verified 17 incidents of attacks against hospitals and related personnel, including eight attacks against health-care workers, five threats of attacks and four attacks on health-care facilities (five by the Taliban, seven by ISIL-KP, one each by an undetermined armed group and the National Directorate for Security, one jointly by the Afghan National Police and the National Directorate for Security, one jointly by the Afghan Special Forces and international military forces

and one by a pro-government militia), compared with seven incidents in the previous quarter.

31. The Mission verified the recruitment and use of 19 boys by anti-government elements, compared with five during the previous reporting period. As at 31 March, the Ministry of Justice reported 140 children detained in juvenile rehabilitation centres on national security-related charges, including for their association with armed groups, compared with 171 in December 2017. The task force verified one incident of sexual violence against a boy. The task force also verified 13 incidents of denial of humanitarian access (six each by ISIL-KP and the Taliban and one by the Afghan National Police), compared with six in the last quarter.

32. The Government continued its efforts to address violence against women. On 3 March, the President signed a decree amending the Elimination of Violence against Women Law of 2009, aimed at aligning some of its sentencing provisions with the revised Penal Code, and a decree amending the Penal Code, ensuring the applicability of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law, with regard to crimes of violence against women. On 4 March a presidential decree exempted crimes of violence against women from eligibility for non-custodial sentencing options. On 28 March, the Government released its fifth report (March 2016 to March 2017) on the implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women Law of 2009, recording 4,290 cases of violence against women. International Women's Day was marked in Afghanistan with over 30 events nationwide. In coordination with its partners, UNAMA organized 14 events, highlighting women's rights and the importance of women's role in peace and security and decision-making processes.

33. On 17 April, Afghanistan acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, fulfilling one of the Government's key voluntary pledges pursuant to its candidature for membership of the Human Rights Council. On the same date, Afghanistan also withdrew its reservation to the Convention, fulfilling another long-standing pledge.

34. UNAMA continued to promote the role of civil society through a series of seminars and workshops in 15 provinces. On 30 April, UNAMA launched a compilation of 34 provincial road maps for peace, a product of the Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace, facilitated by UNAMA with civil society, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Afghan High Peace Council. The Dialogue offered opportunities for developing consensus on the primacy of a political solution to ending the conflict and led to the echoing of calls for peace, development and justice. Civil society activists and media personnel continued to face threats and attacks. UNAMA documented three incidents that killed 11 and injured 6 journalists and media personnel, including a targeted attack in Kabul on 30 April in which 9 journalists were killed and 6 were injured.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul Process and coordination of development assistance

35. In line with its commitments at the conferences held in London and Brussels, on 2 April, the Government finalized an action plan for implementing its policy of 10 January to increase the number of women working in the civil service. The Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission has also taken measures to standardize the structures of government ministries and agencies based on functional and needs assessments conducted at the national and subnational levels. Following this process, the Commission identified 17,700 vacant positions, including 8,700 for teachers, and held competitive exams through a countrywide mass-recruitment process for 225,670 eligible candidates. The first results of these exams

were announced in May. In a further effort to strengthen the civil service, a new administrative procedure decree and amendments to the Civil Servants Law were approved in March. The Government also made progress on improving access to information. On 3 March, the President endorsed a new Access to Information Law through a decree. Among other amendments to the Access to Information Law of 2014, under the new law an independent commission for access to information was established and protections for whistle-blowers were introduced.

36. In February, the President, together with the Afghanistan Land Authority, launched the national independent development programme for land administration to establish a comprehensive land register database, which will provide a basis for addressing land usurpation. The Government also continued work on its new land allocation decree, which will govern the allocation of land to returnees and internally displaced persons. Following extensive consultation with stakeholders, including UNAMA, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), a draft of the decree was discussed by the Council of Ministers on 4 March and is pending finalization.

37. On 15 May, UNAMA released its second annual report on anti-corruption efforts. The report commended the Government for implementing several key anti-corruption reforms in 2017 and early 2018, including the launch of its anti-corruption strategy in October 2017, strengthened anti-corruption measures in the new Penal Code, the increasing capacity of the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre and the adoption of a more transparent national budget. However, the report also highlighted significant gaps in the institutional anti-corruption framework and provided recommendations for further reforms to bring Afghanistan more fully into compliance with the United Nations Convention against Corruption. The Government made some progress in drafting an anti-corruption law. On 1 April, following a long delay in the drafting process, the President instructed the Ministry of Justice to finalize the law. On 14 May, the draft law was discussed by the High Council for Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption in the presence of civil society and the international community.

38. The Government took steps towards implementing its new Penal Code, which came into force on 14 February. According to the Ministry of Justice, 5,000 copies of the Code were printed, of which 1,219 copies have been distributed to courts and prosecution offices countrywide. The remaining copies were distributed to other government offices and international stakeholders. In response to the high demand for copies, several international donors initiated the procurement of an additional 10,000 copies to be made available to the Ministry of Justice for distribution. In April, international donor agencies finished planning a 26-week training programme, to be rolled out jointly by the training departments of the Supreme Court, the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Justice. In April, UNAMA started a survey on the implementation of the new Penal Code at the subnational level. The results of the survey and accompanying observations will be shared with relevant institutions and the international community to further guide capacity-building efforts.

39. Since the previous report, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre has tried an additional seven cases, bringing the overall caseload to 34 cases involving 142 accused persons since the Centre was established in 2016. The number of cases tried in absentia, owing to a lack of capacity among the security institutions to enforce court summons, has remained high.

40. In response to the expectation expressed by the President that the United Nations should "deliver as one", under the Government's leadership, the United Nations in Afghanistan has undertaken a comprehensive review of its work. On 16 April, the

President met representatives of the United Nations entities to discuss the progress made under the "One United Nations" framework for Afghanistan. At the meeting, the President was briefed on the progress made in the six thematic areas under the framework: education; food security, nutrition and livelihoods; health; return and reintegration: rule of law; and normative work. A paper describing the approach was presented. The President emphasized that poverty reduction was a key objective for the Government.

41. During April and May, UNAMA supported the Government and donors with the preparations for the ministerial conference on Afghanistan, to be hosted by the United Nations jointly with Afghanistan in Geneva on 28 November. UNAMA, donors and the Government identified key issues for the conference agenda and steps to be taken by the Government prior to the conference. In order to formulate an update to the deliverables under the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework, which expire at the end of 2018, UNAMA hosted a joint workshop with donors and government representatives to assess the existing deliverables.

V. Humanitarian assistance and returnees

42. To date in 2018, 75,643 people have been newly displaced by conflict, with 40,301 displaced between 15 February and 15 May, a decrease of 65 per cent compared with the same period in 2017. Particularly high levels of displacement were recorded in Kunduz Province, with more than 13,000 displaced people, and Faryab Province, with more than 10,000 displaced. Many displaced families have been forced to move multiple times and have no immediate prospect of returning to their areas of origin in safety and dignity. Humanitarian partners provided 121,684 people displaced by conflict with life-saving assistance during the reporting period.

43. Trauma care remains a priority in terms of humanitarian needs, particularly given the recent increase in the number of suicide attacks in densely populated areas. The provinces with the highest requirements for trauma care are Kandahar, Kunduz, Nangarhar and Takhar. During the reporting period, the 15 partners of the health cluster provided consultations to 496,834 people, of whom 56 per cent were women and girls.

44. In mid-April, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock officially declared a drought. The main planting season, spanning from October 2017 to February 2018, was severely compromised by the La Niña weather effect, which saw a precipitation deficit of 70 per cent in most of the country. The low level of precipitation was the main factor behind a forecast reduction in wheat production from 4.2 million metric tons in 2017 to 3.5 million metric tons in 2018. Humanitarian partners estimate that more than 2 million people will be affected by the drought across two thirds of the country, with 1.4 million severely affected people in need of emergency food, water, hygiene, sanitation and nutrition support to survive. Drought-related migration has begun in some provinces, while depleted food stocks were reported in Badghis and Ghor Provinces. More than half a million people may have to leave their homes, if they are not provided with food and water in their villages in time. Based on existing humanitarian stockpiles and available resources, the humanitarian community is only able to support 90,000 people for a period of two months with half-food rations. Overall, partners have estimated that $136 million is required to provide a comprehensive response to 1.4 million people for a period of six months, which includes possible migration movements. Almost two thirds of that amount is required to support food needs alone.

45. A total of 220,123 Afghan citizens — including spontaneous returnees, deportees and refugees — returned to their home country during the reporting period.

From mid-February to 15 May, 11,413 people arrived from Pakistan (11,035 spontaneous arrivals and 378 deportees) and 202,644 from the Islamic Republic of Iran (84,478 spontaneous arrivals and 118,166 deportees), according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). UNHCR resumed its voluntary repatriation programme from Pakistan on 1 March after the winter pause and assisted in the return of 5,722 people. In addition, UNHCR repatriated 311 refugees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 33 from other countries during the reporting period.

46. The total number of returnees from Pakistan was 75 per cent lower than in the previous year, and similar to 2014 levels, when the lowest return figure was recorded. The lower number of returns this year is linked to the improved protection conditions in Pakistan, along with the decision by the Federal Cabinet of Pakistan to extend the validity of the proof-of-registration cards, which provide temporary legal stay to 1.4 million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, until June 2018. The authorities of Pakistan have begun the issuance of Afghan Citizen Cards to over 878,000 undocumented Afghans who have applied to register since August 2017. The cards will remain valid until 30 June 2018, and holders are required to return to Afghanistan to register for civil documentation, including a passport and a visa for Pakistan, before returning to Pakistan. An estimated 400,000 Afghans remain undocumented in Pakistan, and are vulnerable to the threat of deportation should the protection environment deteriorate.

47. Constraints on humanitarian access continued, with a total of 70 incidents affecting the United Nations and its humanitarian partners from 15 February to 15 May. Since January, 13 aid workers have been killed, 9 injured and 21 abducted. Compared with 2017, there have been more direct armed attacks on health-care facilities. Access to communities in need of assistance in contested areas and areas under the control of anti-government elements remained a persistent challenge for humanitarian partners.

48. Seven cases of polio have been confirmed this year, with poliovirus transmission currently limited to five districts in Kandahar, Kunar and Nangarhar. One subnational and two nationwide polio vaccination campaigns were conducted during the reporting period, aiming to reach more than 6 million and 9.9 million children, respectively. Inaccessibility owing to vaccination bans and active conflict remains a major concern, with the number of inaccessible children increasing from 60,000 in February to 110,000 in March, 130,000 in April and more than half a million in May. Permanent transit vaccination teams placed around inaccessible areas and major transit routes vaccinate over 1.1 million children every month.

49. The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) scaled up clearance activities in support of the national plan and has renewed its focus on risk education. In support of IOM and UNHCR, UNMAS continued to provide risk education to returnees through border points, reaching 84,769 men, women and children in the first quarter of 2018. In the first quarter of 2018, victim-operated improvised explosive devices, referred to as "pressure-plate improvised explosive devices" in previous reports, were a leading cause of conflict-related death and injury of civilians in Afghanistan. There were 274 civilian casualties due to landmines (including victim-operated improvised explosive devices, in use in Afghanistan since 2010, and earlier emplaced anti-personnel and anti-tank mines) and explosive remnants of war during the first quarter of 2018, a 54 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2017. In the first quarter of 2018, 89 per cent of victims of explosive remnants of war were children, an 8 per cent increase from 2017.

50. To support the Government in addressing the increasing humanitarian access constraints caused by the presence of victim-operated improvised explosive devices, UNMAS co-led a task force, with the Directorate of Mine Action Coordination, to

define procedures and training requirements for the Government to be able to safely clear improvised explosive devices abandoned by parties to the conflict, and enable greater access for civilians and humanitarian actors.

51. As of 1 May, humanitarian activities in Afghanistan had received $129.3 million in funding, of which $98.2 million was for activities included in the Humanitarian Response Plan. The number of people targeted for assistance is 2.8 million people.

VI. Counter-narcotics

52. In May, the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics released a socioeconomic report on opium cultivation in Afghanistan in 2017, with technical support from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The report provides a comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. The report recommends measures for building resilience to opium poppy cultivation in rural communities, including a mix of alternative development and law enforcement interventions to reduce opium poppy cultivation.

53. The Government, supported by international partners, continued its counter-narcotics operations during the reporting period. From 1 March to 30 April, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted a total of 612 counter-narcotics operations, leading to seizures of 541 kilograms of heroin, 1,157 kilograms of opium, 32 kilograms of methamphetamine, 5,639 kilograms of hashish, 2,390 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) K-tablets, 184 kilograms of solid precursor chemicals and 883 litres of liquid precursor chemicals. Eight heroin manufacturing laboratories were also dismantled. In total, 685 suspects were arrested and 86 vehicles, 28 weapons and 212 mobile phones were seized. One officer of the Counter-Narcotics Police of Afghanistan was killed while carrying out counter-narcotics operations during the reporting period.

VII. Mission support

54. As at 30 April, the Mission's vacancy rates were 17 per cent for international staff and 6 per cent for national staff, compared with the approved rates of 14 per cent and 7.5 per cent, respectively. The proportion of female staff, despite special measures granted for the Mission to recruit and retain more national female staff, remained very low. As at 30 April, the percentage of women in each category of staff stood at: 32 per cent for international staff, 38 per cent for United Nations Volunteers, 11 per cent for National Professional Officers and 7 per cent for Local level staff. Between 1 February and 30 April 2018, UNAMA conducted 224 road and 13 air missions, as well as 736 reverse outreach missions during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

55. As noted in the previous report, a series of brutal attacks in early 2018 made the task of bringing about a negotiated settlement to the conflict both more difficult and more urgent. The National Unity Government's offer to the Taliban, made at the second meeting of the Kabul Process, to hold talks without preconditions presented a constructive way forward. The resounding international support for the offer expressed at the conferences held in Kabul and Tashkent provides further impetus to the peace negotiations. Ultimately, however, peace in Afghanistan must be made by and between Afghans. In that respect, I am heartened by the emergence of a genuine

civic peace movement, in which citizens across Afghanistan have joined forces to advocate an end to war. I urge all parties to heed the call of the Afghan people, whose enduring desire for peace can be fulfilled only through inclusive negotiations.

56. Ensuring an inclusive and credible electoral process while a significant percentage of the population lives in parts of the country that are insecure and where the reach of State authority is limited remains a fundamental challenge. The peaceful conduct of elections at all stages is critical in enabling people to exercise their right to vote without fear or threat of insecurity. Of concern are the ongoing attempts to disrupt the electoral process through violent means, including tactics such as attacks on election-related facilities, abductions of electoral staff and intimidation and harassment of registered voters. I condemn the suicide attacks targeting a national registration centre in Kabul on 22 April and a voter registration site in Khost Province on 6 May, each of which caused dozens of civilian casualties. Apart from the direct harm that they inflict on the population, such attacks represent an assault on the fundamental right of citizens to vote. The commitment and courage demonstrated by the people of Afghanistan, who continue to register as voters in the face of such threats, is heartening. I call on all parties to respect the constitutional rights of the Afghan people and to enable the conduct of elections that are worthy of their courage.

57. Operational challenges continue to be faced in the preparations for the elections. Slow decision-making and protracted debates over electoral issues risk delaying the timetable for parliamentary and district council elections, while undermining public confidence in the electoral process. I encourage the electoral management bodies to streamline their decision-making processes, take necessary decisions swiftly and strengthen coordination with other institutions and with civil society in all aspects of electoral preparations. Apart from allowing Afghans to elect parliamentary and district council representatives of their choice, credible and inclusive elections can serve as an important step in Afghanistan's ongoing democratic consolidation. To ensure the sustainability of Afghanistan's electoral institutions, it is vital that the independence of the electoral management bodies is respected.

58. The fragmented political environment in Afghanistan poses another challenge for the country, not only for the forthcoming elections, but also more generally for governance and reconciliation. Political will and unity are very much needed in order to hold credible elections and advance the peace process. Progress in that regard will also help to pave the way for much-needed reforms to take hold. I call upon all Afghan political actors to ensure a commonality of purpose and a joining of efforts for the success of those essential processes.

59. The conflict continues to inflict an unacceptable toll on the citizens of Afghanistan. I am deeply concerned by the continued rise in civilian casualties from the indiscriminate use of suicide improvised explosive devices by anti-government elements. This tactic has now become the leading cause of civilian casualties, surpassing combined casualties by all parties from ground engagements in the first quarter of 2018. I note with concern that the number of civilian casualties from attacks by anti-government elements deliberately targeting civilians more than doubled compared with the first quarter of 2017 and call upon anti-government elements to put an immediate stop to the indiscriminate use of suicide improvised explosive devices. Consistent with the disturbing trends observed in 2016 and 2017, anti-government elements continued to carry out direct attacks against the minority Shia Muslim population, causing 154 civilian casualties, nearly all from suicide and complex attacks claimed by ISIL-KP. Recalling the obligations of all parties to avoid civilian casualties under international human rights and humanitarian law, I call on anti-government elements to cease these atrocious attacks against civilian targets.

60. Protecting women from violence and holding perpetrators to account are essential to ensuring women's meaningful participation in socioeconomic, political, peace and security processes. The Government and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission regularly monitor the implementation of domestic laws on crimes of violence against women. I encourage the full implementation of the national strategy and action plan on the elimination of violence against women, as well as the finalization of the Government's third periodic report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, all of which would provide an important demonstration of its commitment to protecting the rights and lives of all women.

61. With the accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Government is fulfilling one of the voluntary pledges made in support of its candidacy for membership of the Human Rights Council. The United Nations stands ready to provide the necessary technical support in establishing a national preventive mechanism for the prevention of torture, in line with the Government's commitments under the Convention. Following the withdrawal of its reservation to the Convention, Afghanistan now recognizes the competence of the Committee against Torture to conduct confidential enquiries into allegations of the systematic use of torture on its territory. The United Nations will continue to assist Afghanistan in its efforts to eliminate the use of torture in government-run detention facilities.

62. The rise in the recruitment and use of children by parties to the conflict, which increased three-fold compared with the previous reporting period, is deeply concerning. As the recruitment and use of children during armed conflict is one of the six grave violations identified by the Security Council, I call upon all parties to the conflict to put an immediate stop to the recruitment and use of children and urge the Government to adopt the measures necessary to establish referral and rehabilitation mechanisms for victims.

63. The Government of Afghanistan continued to pursue important reforms. The promulgation of the Access to Information Law, which contains additional protections for whistle-blowers, represents a welcome step towards promoting accountable governance. As the Government implements its anti-corruption strategy, continuous constructive engagement with local institutions, civil society and international partners will remain crucial, as combating corruption in Afghanistan will require the sustained and concerted efforts of all stakeholders. In line with the recommendations of the UNAMA anti-corruption report, I encourage the Government to take further steps towards institutionalizing the necessary anti-corruption reforms, in accordance with the guidance on implementing the United Nations Convention against Corruption.

64. I am deeply concerned by the ongoing drought in Afghanistan, which has exacerbated the humanitarian situation. The low levels of precipitation experienced throughout the planting season are now threatening the survival of more than 2 million people who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Migration due to the drought has already been reported, and more than half a million people may be displaced if they are not provided with timely and adequate food and water supplies in their home villages. As humanitarian partners scale up their assistance to more than 1.4 million of the most vulnerable people, I call upon donors to respond to the urgent appeal by the United Nations for an additional $137 million to meet the basic needs of the drought-affected population.

65. The United Nations is committed to maintaining its strong and enduring relationship with the people and the Government of Afghanistan. The One United Nations framework developed by the United Nations system in Afghanistan, brings

its work into closer alignment with the priorities of the Government, while reflecting the global objectives of the United Nations. I welcome the strong commitment of the United Nations agencies, funds, and programmes to continue their close collaboration with local institutions to enhance the quality of service delivery to all Afghans.

66. I thank all United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under such challenging conditions to fulfil our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan.